

BLM grants winter drilling exceptions

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PINEDALE -- The Wyoming Game and Fish Department has called for no new exceptions allowing more natural gas development activity on federal lands around Pinedale this winter, but the agency isn't getting its way.

All requests for exceptions submitted by energy companies to the Bureau of Land Management so far this year have been granted.

According to a table published on the BLM's Web site, 13 requests have been granted by the agency for winter drilling activity, with nine requests outstanding.

In one request, Ultra Resources has asked to drill a deep well through May in crucial winter range for antelope. BLM officials have said they intend to grant that request.

Dennis Stenger, Pinedale field manager for the BLM, said that proposal has "been on the desk for a long time," and Game and Fish officials were aware of it. He said that well will be granted, but Ultra and Shell will not drill three other wells they are permitted to drill in the winter, so there is a net loss of wells.

"We've discussed this with Game and Fish in its location, and we don't foresee this as being an impact area," Stenger said.

The BLM also indicated several mitigation factors will be implemented with the well, including busing crews, continued air quality analysis and "continued funding of antelope and sage grouse function."

In another request, Shell received permission to drill and complete a well in sage grouse habitat through March. The BLM said the activity was "not in

concentration area," and Stenger said the well is not in big game crucial winter range.

Another request granted to Stone Energy to drill wells into January is considered "not in concentration area," according to the BLM.

Peter Aengst, energy coordinator with The Wilderness Society, agreed Game and Fish knew about the Ultra deep well request, but said the other requests are a "litmus test for whether BLM is going to coordinate with state wildlife officials on managing gas drilling disturbance to big game in the Pinedale area."

"By granting them, they just completely failed the test," he said. "These BLM decisions run completely counter to what state wildlife officials have recommended. By granting these exemptions, BLM is essentially thumbing its nose at the state's concerns with drought conditions and gas boom impacts on big game here."

Sublette County is seeing some of the most significant natural gas development in the West. The impact of that development on wildlife is one of the biggest environmental concerns stemming from the drilling activity. In the Pinedale Anticline field, drilling activity generally is not allowed after Nov. 15, unless the BLM grants exceptions.

Stenger said most of the exception requests are for a 15-day window after closures take effect Wednesday to protect big game. He said it is preferable to have the exceptions "up front" rather than later because wildlife is more susceptible to stress later in the winter.

"It's not a major impact at this point," he said. "We still want to be cautious; we still want to look at everything."

And many of the requests are for non-drilling operations, such as hooking wells up to production, plugging and abandoning wells and monitoring well flows. But

some are for drilling and completion activities -- considered much more disturbing for wildlife.

In late October, Game and Fish officials sent a letter to Stenger saying shrub growth around Pinedale has been poor, and the "quality and quantity of forage available to wintering wildlife" is reduced. Game and Fish said agency field biologists "will probably not concur with exception requests if there is an increased risk to animals already under stress."

"We wanted to give (energy companies) a heads up that winter range conditions are extremely poor and when they ask for our recommendation to approve or deny an exception, our recommendation will be to deny it," Bernie Holz, wildlife supervisor for the Jackson and Pinedale regions, said earlier this month.

Two Questar wells were approved for winter drilling last year, both in crucial mule deer winter range. Ultra has a third well. The BLM is studying the possibility of expanded winter drilling on the Pinedale Anticline in a supplemental environmental document, which is expected in the next few months, which applies to drilling beginning next winter.

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